

October 21- the Police Memorial Day

By G.P.Joshi¹

The police in this country are often criticised, and rightly so, for all the wrongs the police personnel often do. However, a complaint very often voiced by the police officers is that while the individual failures get comprehensive publicity in the media, the organisation's achievements are invariably neglected. The good, which the force does dies and the evil which an individual policeman does lives for ever producing a cumulative reaction of hostility and opposition on the part of the public.

There can be no doubt that the police force has done considerably good work on different occasions and in different parts of the country. Despite its bad and unsavoury record in many fields, the police in this country can legitimately claim credit for standing successfully against the forces of disorder. There have been very few areas in the country, which have not witnessed large-scale law and order disturbances on some occasion or the other. Every decade has had its share of violence, though the last was the worst in terms of challenges posed to the national security by terrorist violence supported and fuelled from across the border.

The policemen have often worked under very difficult circumstances and tried to control crime and maintain internal security against all odds. While doing so, they have also made many sacrifices, including the supreme sacrifice of losing their lives. A large number of police personnel have been killed in line of duty.

According to data compiled by the Intelligence Bureau, policing took a toll of as many as 21,428 lives of police personnel during the period 1961-62 to 1999-2000. During the last decade, the toll became very heavy. During a nine-year period i.e. 1991-92 to 1999-2000, as many as 9389 police personnel died in line of duty, an average of more than 1043 lives per year.

This is a very heavy toll. No police force anywhere else in the world has paid such heavy price. Even in the United States of America, where the violence levels during police-citizen encounters are quite high, the number of police casualties in line of duty has not been that high. The total number of law enforcement officers feloniously killed in the line of duty during the seventies in that country was 1,143 officers. The number slain during the eighties

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was only 801,² but the number during the second half of the last decade (1996-2000) was 845. Ireland is reported to have been one of the most violent spots in Europe during the last few decades. However, only 302 Royal Armed Constabulary officers and men lost their lives over the past 30 years. In Britain, till the eighties, only 220 police officers are reported to have been killed in line of duty since the Metropolitan Police Force was founded in 1829.

Unfortunately, the sacrifices made by police personnel while performing their duty have not received adequate recognition in this country. This has happened primarily because the image of the police has not been good. The public do not make a distinction between the police force and a policeman. A single bad incident of misuse of police power by an individual policeman works like a bad coin. It drives all the good work of the organisation out of circulation.

The administrative response to the unfortunate misery resulting from a policeman's death in the form of pensionary benefits, ex-gratia grants, financial help to the bereaved family has shown improvement during the last few years. However, this is not enough. The societal reaction needs to be more sensitive, considerate and understanding of the role of policeman in society and conditions under which that role is being performed. We have yet to give the policeman a status befitting his role in society. The poor image leads to a low status and the low status in turn perpetuates that image. The vicious circle keeps on widening the existing chasm between the police and the community.

To some extent, the police department is also responsible for not giving wide publicity to the sacrifices, which the police personnel are making in the line of duty. A routine, formal and cursory recognition of these sacrifices on October 21, which is observed as the Police Memorial Day, is not enough. October 21 should not be regarded merely as an occasion for laying down wreaths and doing ceremonial parades in police lines. The ceremony must also come out of the police lines and become an occasion for remembrance by others in the society.

² Victoria L. Major: *Law Enforcement Officers Killed 1980-1989*, FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, May 1991, pp2-5.

Though a very large number of police personnel are losing their lives while dealing with terrorists/ extremists, other police duties, like investigating crimes, attempting arrests, responding to distress calls, escorting accused, attempting to stop suspicious vehicles etc. also take a toll of police lives. In other countries, if a policeman is killed in such circumstances, it becomes a top priority of the police department to catch the culprits at any cost. That type of reaction is generally not seen from the police departments in this country. In January this year, the media while reporting the murder of Sub-Inspector V.K. Yadav of Delhi Police, who was killed when he tried to arrest a criminal, came out with information about past cases where Delhi policemen had been killed while on duty and the killers had remained at large³.

The death of a policeman at the hands of a criminal is much more than the sum of resources invested in his recruitment, training and maintenance. A policeman is a symbol of law and its authority and when he dies at the hands of a ruffian, a part of our system of law, as somebody has rightly said, dies with him.

Some element of professional risk is involved in a police job and has to be accepted. However, the country can not afford to keep on losing so many of its policemen every year. It is necessary to increase the self-protection awareness and ability of policemen through improved training and better equipment to enable them to deal with hazardous situations, without incurring unnecessary losses.

³ Pioneer , January 14, 2001: *Day 5: No leads on cop killer*